

THE PEASANTS' RIOTS OF 1875, AND THE DECCAN
AGRICULTURISTS' RELIEF ACT 1879

(A Note on Some Sources)

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The year 1875 witnessed a violent eruption in the rural society of the Deccan. The redistribution of the power, after the British conquest of the Maratha territory created tension between the peasantry and the petty trading community of the rural area. The enhanced prestige in the socio-economic life of village - of this petty trading community which used to carry on the moneylending business also and which used to be referred to as Vanis, or banias or Marwadis, was supposed to be the major cause of the Deccan Riots. These riots drew the compulsive attention of the Government to the grievances of the wet-feet and led to the passing of the Act of 1879. Thus the agrarian riots of 1875 and the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879 (Act XVII of 1879) are of great importance in the history of the peasants movements in India.

This paper is in no way an attempt to analyse the various aspects of the riots and the said Act, and least to draw any conclusions. It only attempts to highlight some of the sources which throw a flood of light on all dimensions of the subject. Some facts and comments are quoted from some of the sources, so as to illustrate the importance of these sources. For the sake of convenience we may examine the sources under two heads - (A) Official Sources, i.e., the sources that represent the view of the concerned Government officials, (B) Native Sources, i.e., the sources that speak of

the view point of the natives. The subject under review can be divided into two parts: (I) Causes and the nature of the riots, (II) the view or the policy that led to the enactment of the said Act, and the public criticism thereof.

(A) OFFICIAL SOURCES

(I) Causes and Nature of the Riots: The Deccan Riots can well be regarded as an uprising of the debtors against the money-lenders. It would be erroneous to assume that the Government was unaware of the forces that brought about the uprising. Besides the distinct warnings of Sir George Wingate in 1852 and Mr. Inverarity in 1858, the Police Reports speak with no uncertain tone about the causes. ¹ It had been asserted that 'had it not been for a transient period of prosperity, the crisis which has occurred would have happened long ago.' ² The affected districts were poor and in places sterile. The ryots, themselves a hardworking and docile race had for long ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ remained under a heavy load of ancestral debt, which was one of the causes of their perpetual poverty. This poverty so often took the peasants to the money-lenders and added to their debt. In addition to all this, there was betrayal of the rains. According to

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1. Deccan Riots Commission, Minutes by J.R. Richey, C.W. Carpenter, A. Lyon and Shambhoo Prasad Laxmeelal, Bombay 1876, pp.3-4.
 2. E.W. Ravenscroft, Chief Secretary to Government of Bombay, Revenue Department, 6 April 1877, Home, Legislative Department A, December 1879, pp.1-54.

the new system, the land revenue was to be paid at fixed times and in fixed sums in cash. This was a tough task for the penniless tillers of the soil. As a consequence of all these adverse circumstances the riots commenced on 12 May 1875. The object was, in every case, to obtain by force and destroy loan bonds executed by the cultivators with the money lenders. The riots took place in 11 villages of the Poona and in 22 villages of the Ahmednagar Collectorates. The outbreak was over in about a month. The number of persons arrested was 951, of whom 501 were convicted.³

There is a plethora of correspondence between the Government officials, and their Minutes and Reports which deal with the causes and nature of the riots. One such important official source is the 'The Deccan Riots Commission, Minutes by J.B. Richey, C.W. Carpenter, A. Lyon and Shambhoo Prasad Laxmeelal' (printed at Government Press, Bombay, 1876). This Report (213 pages) also contains the extracts from the letters from Sub-Judges, Assistant Collectors, Collectors, Revenue-Commissioners, and Settlement Commissioners of Poona, Ahmednagar and Sholapur districts. These Minutes and Notes give a detailed account about the economic aspect of the problem. For example, in his Minute, Shambhoo Prasad Laxmeelal maintained that, "In the Broach Collectorate, say, a ryot possessing 10 acres of land has a net income of Rs.200, after paying the Government assessment; say, Rs.40; while in the Poona and Ahmednagar Collectorates a cultivator, having the

3. E.W. Ravenscroft, Chief Secretary to Government of Bombay, Revenue Department, 6 April 1877, Home, Legislative Department A, December 1879, 1-54.

same extent of land, would only save Rs.25, after payment of assessment, say Rs.5. Suppose, then, the debt of both the ryots commences to increase, on the amount of bonds/equal principal, since the new limitation came in force. The ryot who saves yearly Rs.25 will not lose credit till the principal amounts to a sum the annual interest of which will be Rs.25, while the other to a sum the interest of which will be Rs.200. Thus in the second case the time for losing credit will be eight times of the first case, though the principal at the commencement in both was equal."⁴

(II) The Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act, 1879: The policy of the Government that led to the enactment of the said Act can be read in a Minute of 30 August 1878, by Richard Temple, Governor of Bombay. The intention of the Act, he tells us, was:-

"To make it illegal to award compound interest or more interest than the amount of the principal found to be due.

To limit the liability of a ryot for debts incurred by his ancestors, etc."⁵

Most of these Notes, Minutes and letters are available in the National Archives of India. They can be found in the series of the Judicial and Legislative Departments. To mention but a few files -

1. Legislative Department, B, Oct. 1875, 32 to 55.
2. -do- A, Dec. 1879, 1 to 54.

4. Deccan Riots Commission, Op.Cit., P.18.

5. Legislative Department, A, Proceedings Dec. 1879, 1-54.

3. Home Judicial Department, A, Jan. 1876, 15 to 17.
4. -do- A, Apl. 1879, 3 to 32.
5. -do- A, Aug. 1879, 91 to 113.
6. -do- B, Oct. 1879, 12 to 137.
7. -do- B, Nov. 1879, 1 to 54.

All these files constitute very important source to know about the view-point of the Government. The number of such extremely important files, from which some are mentioned above, is quite considerable and one cannot afford to neglect them. The text of the Act, along with its amendments in 1881 (by the Act XXIII of 1881) and in 1882 (by the Act XXII of 1882) is to be found in 'A Collection of the Acts passed by the Governor General of India in Council in the year 1879' (pp.342-84), published at Calcutta in 1880. This is also available in the National Archives.

The Maharashtra State Archives also has a number of records which can be profitably used for the study of the subject under review. The Proceedings of the Revenue and Judicial Departments (1875 to 1879) are full of information.

The Peshwa Daftar, at Poona, has a number of files under the heading 'The Deccan Commissioners' files'. It contains the administrative and judicial records. In addition to these archival sources, some of the Government publications are of vital importance. They are as follows:-

1. Papers relating to the Deccan Agriculturists' Relief Act of 1879, 2 Volumes, Selections from the Records of the Government of India, Home Department, No.342. Published by the Government of India.

2. Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, No.4: Report on the Village Communities of the Deccan, by N.R.Goodine, (Published by the Government of Bombay).
3. Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, New Series, No.47: Papers relating to the Deccan Agriculturists' Act of 1879. (Published by the Government of Bombay).
4. Selections from the Records of the Bombay Government, New Series, No.151: Report by Col. J. Francis on the Taluka of Indopur. (Published by the Government of Bombay).
5. Report of the Committee on the Riots in Poona and Ahmednagar, 1875, 2 Volumes. (Published by Government of Bombay, 1876).
6. Source Material for a History of the Freedom Movement in India, Volume, I, 1881-1885. Published by the Government of Maharashtra, 1957.

(B) NATIVE SOURCES

A vocal class of the nation, however 'microscopic-minority' in number, had come into existence even before 1875. This class had begun to take keen interest in the affairs of the country. It had also laid a claim of representing the aspirations and frustrations, hopes and fears of the 'voiceless-millions' of India. Though this loud claim was always challenged by the imperial-masters, there can be no dispute over the subtle role of this class as a catalytic agent in the political evolution of India. By constant efforts this class made its existence felt through the newspapers, memorials and petitions. Their views and opinions are certainly of much

importance for a critical study of the subject under review.
~~xx~~ Some of the available native sources would convince us that the British view on the subject was one-sided.

(I) Causes and Nature of the Riots:- The most leading Anglo-Marathi Weekly of Bombay, the Indu Prakash (12 July 1875), while commenting upon the riots asserted that, "The dealings between the ryots and the money-lenders are not of today's origin. The change in the Government's policy is the most important cause.... The assessment, the ryots are to pay under the English Government is much larger than they used to pay under the ^{old indigenous} ~~xxxx/xxxx~~ rulers."⁶ Another Anglo-Marathi Weekly of Satara, the Maharashtra Mitra (10 June 1875) tracing the cause of the riots said that, "The Government has enormously enhanced the rates of assessment on land, lessened the number of instalments in which the assessment is to be paid, and fixed the days of the payment of the instalments earlier."⁷ The peasantry of Ratnagiri had also registered their resentment through a communication to the Anglo-Marathi bi-weekly of Poona, the Duyan Prakash (13 January 1875). They complained that, "in addition to the land tax a duty of eight annas is charged for every coconut ^{tree}, whether toddy is drawn from it or not."⁸ Thus, these newspapers put the blame on the Government for the excess assessment. These newspapers also gave an account of the disturbances. The Indu Prakash,

6. Report on the Native Newspaper of Bombay Presidency, January-June 1875, P.43.

7. Report on the Native Newspaper of Bombay Presidency, January-June 1875, P. 517.

8. Ibid., P.29.

(7 June 1875), tells us that, "The wrath of the disturbers is directed only against the money-lenders, the village-Marwaris. They do not molest or injure any other people whatever... To put (the riots) down not only the police but even the military aid is required."⁹

The riots were thoroughly discussed in the native newspapers and this becomes evident from the titles of some of the articles - The Indu Prakash (12 July 1875) contained an article headed as, "The Agrarian Riots."¹⁰ The Shubha Suchak, a Marathi Weekly of Satara; on 16 July, 1875 questioned "Is Government still asleep?"¹¹ Another Marathi Weekly of Poona, the Shiwaji, came out on 1 October 1875 with the headline, "What has led the Agricultural classes to attack and plunder their creditor?"¹² The native press had offered many suggestions in regard to the enquiry by the Commission. Thus, the famous Gujarati Weekly of Bombay, the Rasta Goftar, brought out a long leader on 22 August 1875, with the title "The Proposed Commission on the Poona Riots." It criticised the Government for not accepting the help offered by the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha.¹³ The Indu Prakash also pleaded on 30 August 1875 for the inclusion of some native gentlemen in the said Commission.¹⁴

9. Ibid., P.487

10. Ibid. (July-December) Vol., P.43.

11. Ibid., P.67.

12. Ibid., P.303.

13. Report on the Native Newspaper of Bombay Presidency, July-December, Vol., P.183.

14. Ibid., P. 195.

II. The Deccan Agriculturists' Act, 1879: The causes and effects of the poverty of the peasantry, the bitter criticism of the Governmental policies, that appeared in the native newspapers had strong support of a public body like the Sarvajanik Sabha of Poona. When the Act was on the table of the Council, the native press discussed it thread bare. One of the Gujarathi Weeklies of Surat, the Gujarat Mitra, vehemently attacked the Government on 29 December 1879, in its editorial entitled, "The Bill for the improvement of the condition of the cultivators."¹⁵ One can hardly come across a newspaper of the Bombay presidency, during the period under review, which did not comment upon the Act. The Poona Sarvajanik Sabha also had sent their views and suggestions to ~~also had sent their views and suggestions to~~ the Government on 6 September 1879. The Sabha had made it emphatically clear that, "the proposed reforms will not secure any real relief, unless they are accompanied by a change in the system of revenue settlement."¹⁶ There were some persons who in their private capacity had sent memorials to the Government. One Byramjee Jeejeebhoy of Bombay sent a Memorial to the Viceroy on 2 October 1879 wherein he prayed "for the exclusion of suits involving issues of the nature of mortgages from the summary jurisdiction of Subordinate Judges, leaving them to be dealt with, according to the provisions of the Code of Civil Procedure."¹⁷

15. Ibid., January-July 1879, P.9.

16. Home, Judicial Department, B, October, 1879, 129-137.

17. Home, Judicial Department, B, October 1879, 267-269.

Prior to this, one Eshvant Sridhar of Poona had offered 21 suggestions to the Government of India, in regard to the revenue administration of the villages. In his Memorial dated 17 August 1879, he proposed: - "(1) That a man of some position and education, from among the villagers should be appointed to the Khoti of one or more villages. (2) That he be allowed to advance money to the raitis on a small interest to be laid down by Government."¹⁸

Thus, there exist a number of sources that speak of the opinion of the people. Among them all the Reports on the Natives Newspapers of Bombay Presidency (1875 to 1879) are of prime importance. They are available in the National Archives of India. They contain the English summary of several vernacular newspapers. Though these summaries are made by the expert oriental translators, it must not be forgotten that they were challenged by some of the vernacular newspapers. The Hithechenu of Ahmedabad, 3 July, 1879; the Shivaji of Poona, 27 June, 1879; the Lok-Mitra of Bombay, 24 June, 1879 and the Broach Samachar of Broach, 28 June, 1879, openly challenged the accuracy of the English summaries made by the Government translators.¹⁹ The validity of this challenge is a subject matter for a thorough investigation into the facts.

18. Ibid., September 1879, 208-213.

19. Report on Native Newspapers, Bombay Presidency, July-December 1879, P.11.

Besides these Reports on the Native Newspapers, one may consult some of the newspapers which are available in the Maharashtra State Archives which has about 1,000 files of old newspapers.²⁰ These Reports on Native Newspapers of Bombay Presidency tell us that in 1879, there existed -

1. Anglo-Marathi - Weeklies and Bi-weeklies	-	10
2. Anglo-Gujarati	-do-	32
3. Marathi	-do-	32
4. Gujarati	-do-	28
5. Canarese	-do-	1
6. Hindustani	-do-	1
7. Persian	-do-	1

The circulation of these papers ranged from 1,650 (the Rast-Goftar), to 100 (the Broach Wartaman). Though these papers were run by the educated, middle-class people, usually dwelling in the urban area, they certainly contain the communications either from their correspondents in the rural areas or from some individual - often a sufferer - from some villages. It is true that in the then India/^{the}tiller of the soil was not in a position to pen out his grievances. Yet, one must admit that he might have been voiceless but he was certainly not without opinion. One of the ways to know this opinion is to make a careful approach through the vernacular writings, the writers of which lived amongst the peasantry.

20. V.G.Khobrekhar, - "The Bombay Archives", The Indian Archives, Vol. XX, No. 1 (January-June 1971), P. 46.

The quarterly journal of the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha (the issues of 1879), which contain the papers relating to the riots; and the papers relating to the activities of the Sabha also constitute a source of information. The Marathi biographies like - (1) A.K. Priyolkar, : "Doctor Bhau Daji"; Bombay, 1971, and (2) N.R. Phatak, : "Nyaymurti Mahadev Gobind Ranade", ²¹ Poona, 2nd enlarged edition, 1966, throw light on the period under review and thereby enable us to understand the subject in a wider perspective. In short, the Native sources would enable us to understand, first, the ways and means of the socio-political awakening of the Deccan peasantry, and secondly, the interest and motives of the white-collar-class. It may be said in conclusion that the critical analysis of the official British sources as well as the non-official Native sources would help us in drawing important conclusions.

21. N.R. Phatak, vide, Pp.144-45.